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CIRCULAR DEBT: POWER SECTOR'S DEEPENING CRISIS

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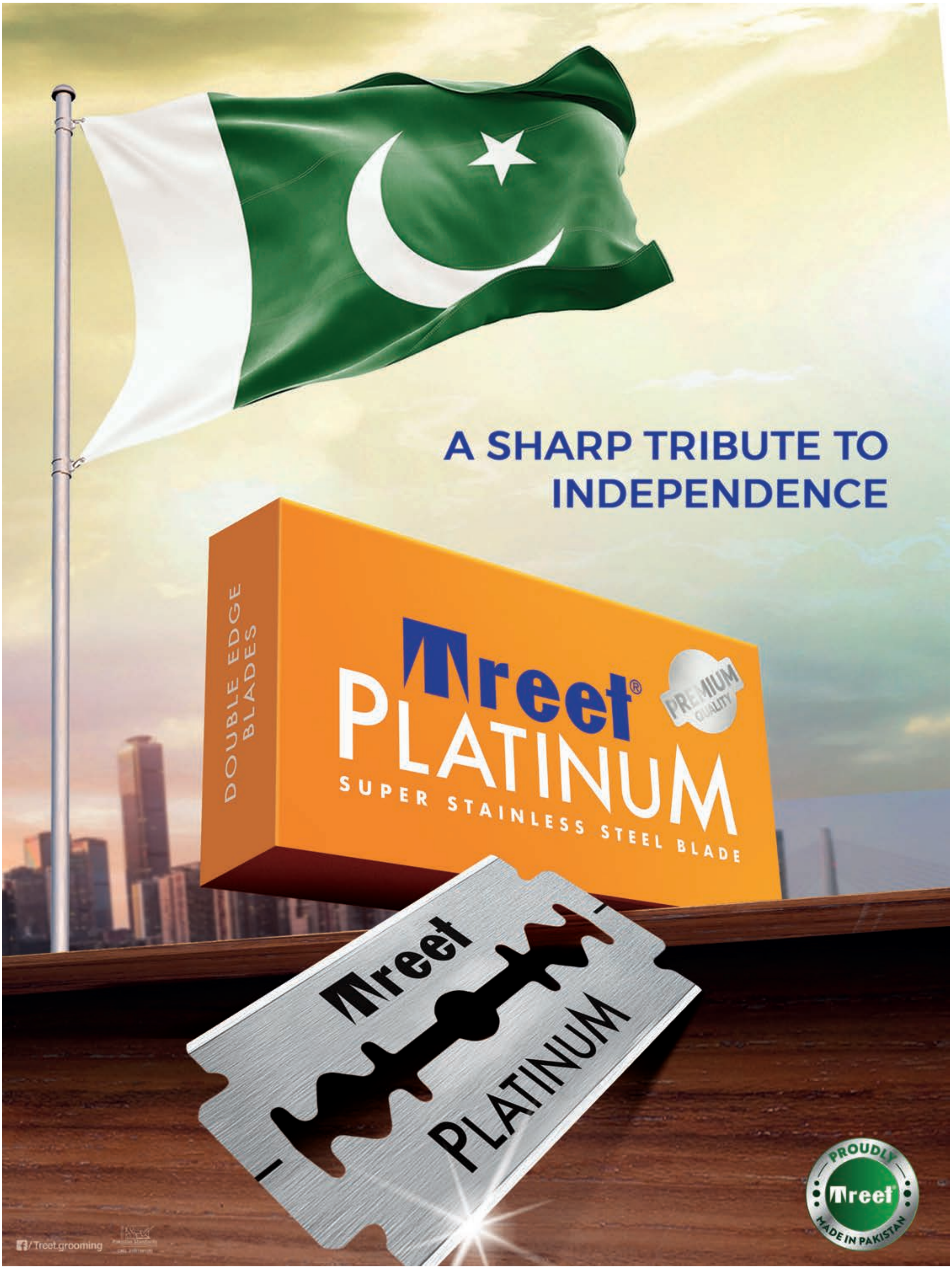
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Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan —- Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers' message for the utmost impact.

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Circular debt: Power sector's deepening crisis

Farhan Khan

Pakistan's power sector circular debt rose by Rs61 billion in fiscal year 2025-26, pushing the stock to Rs1.675 trillion by end-June against an International Monetary Fund target of Rs1.614 trillion under the Extended Fund Facility programme. The shortfall, detailed in Power Division briefings to the Economic Coordination Committee, underscores persistent sectoral inefficiencies that have plagued the energy chain for nearly two decades and threaten further delays in external financing.

Circular debt represents the cascading shortfall of payments across the power supply chain. Distribution companies (DISCOs) fail to collect full revenues from consumers due to theft, technical losses and weak billing; the government delays or underfunds tariff differential subsidies; and the Central Power Purchasing Agency cannot fully pay generators, Independent Power Producers (IPPs) and fuel suppliers. Late-payment surcharges then compound the arrears. The result is a liquidity trap that raises generation costs, deters investment and forces periodic taxpayer-funded bailouts or bank refinancing whose interest ultimately lands on consumers.

The roots stretch to the mid-1990s. Facing chronic shortages, Pakistan's 1994 Power Policy invited private investment through IPPs under cost-plus tariffs, generous returns and "take-or-pay" contracts denominated in dollars. Capacity payments were guaranteed whether or not power was dispatched. These arrangements attracted roughly $5 billion and added thousands of megawatts, but they locked in high fixed costs indexed to the exchange rate and imported fuel prices. When global oil prices surged after 2005 and the rupee depreciated, generation costs outstripped the government-notified tariffs that successive administrations kept artificially low for political reasons. By 2006 the first visible circular-debt stock of about Rs111 billion had emerged.

The trajectory since has been one of repeated accumulation interrupted by temporary clearances. Debt climbed steadily through the late 2000s, reaching hundreds of billions. In 2013 the incoming government injected roughly Rs480 billion to clear the stock, only for it to rebuild. Further peaks approached or exceeded Rs2.3–2.4 trillion in the early 2020s. Efforts to park liabilities in Power Holding Private Limited, issue energy sukuks and refinance through commercial banks provided breathing space but transferred interest costs rather than eliminating the underlying flow. By May 2026 the stock had swollen to Rs1.924 trillion, including Rs873 billion payable to banks under an approved financing facility that secured Rs1.23 trillion commercially—facilitated by the decline in the discount rate from 22 percent to 11.5 percent, a move the IMF accepted.

June 2026 proved particularly revealing.

The Power Division had earlier regarded the IMF stock target of Rs1.614 trillion as realistic, citing lower international hydrocarbon prices, improved recoveries, reduced technical losses and falling interest rates that were expected to generate subsidy savings of Rs779 billion. Reality diverged sharply. Non-payment by K-Electric of roughly Rs200 billion against power purchases, combined with weak performance by some DISCOs that accounted for another Rs100 billion, drove the overshoot. K-Electric tariffs remain sub judice; the Division pledged proactive pursuit of the case yet recommended a technical supplementary grant of about Rs152 billion to fund solarisation or subsidy adjustments and avert any delay or suspension of the next IMF tranche. On 16 June the ECC approved only a partial release of Rs54.451 billion, adjusting the balance of Rs97.549 billion.

Analysts note that such stop-gap measures have been proposed and implemented before with little lasting effect. The accumulation of new debt continues because structural problems remain unaddressed: high transmission and distribution losses well above NEPRA targets, recovery shortfalls, uniform national tariffs that mask cost differences among DISCOs, and rigid IPP contracts featuring dollar-linked capacity payments that cannot easily be renegotiated.

A durable solution requires holistic reform rather than repeated liquidity injections. First, the government should abandon the tariff differential subsidy that costs taxpayers nearly Rs750 billion annually. Allowing each DISCO to set its own tariff according to its actual cost structure would create price signals that reward efficiency and penalise losses, while targeting residual subsidies only to the most vulnerable consumers. Second, the flawed deals with IPPs—particularly the take-or-pay provisions denominated in dollars—must be revisited where legally feasible, shifting towards take-and-pay models and greater reliance on competitive bilateral contracting under the Competitive Trading Bilateral Contract Market framework. Third, the working of DISCOs must improve through professional management, accelerated rollout of advanced metering, strict enforcement against theft, and eventual privatisation or competitive franchising of underperforming entities. Fourth, the generation mix should continue shifting toward indigenous resources—hydel, solar, wind and Thar coal—to reduce exposure to imported fuel price and exchange-rate shocks.

Financing the existing stock can be optimised by converting high-cost circular-debt liabilities into cheaper longer-term public or sovereign-guaranteed instruments serviced through a transparent, time-bound surcharge, as partially already underway. Yet without stemming the annual flow to zero, any stock reduction will prove temporary. Past experience shows that political reluctance to pass through true costs or confront vested interests in the distribution network repeatedly undermines technical plans.

Pakistan's energy circular debt is no longer a technical accounting problem; it is a serious constraint on fiscal space, industrial competitiveness and macroeconomic stability. This calls for urgent remedial action, including lowering tariff, stoppage of theft, strict accountability at the distribution level and, most important of all, rationalising IPPs contracts that have hobbled the normal working of the power sector over the last three decades.

Bridging the political divide: need for a grand national dialogue

Nasim Ahmed

In the high-stakes game of Pakistani politics, the rhetoric of dialogue has once again taken centre stage, even as the ground realities of intense polarization continue to erode the foundations of democratic governance. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has recently renewed calls for constructive engagement with the opposition, inviting the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and allied political groups to resolve ongoing deadlocks through parliamentary dialogue.

Grounding his appeal in the classic political maxim that "it takes two to tango," the prime minister reiterated on the floor of the National Assembly and during federal cabinet meetings his call for the opposition to sit at the negotiating table. The expressed intent is clear: to foster national political stability in support of Pakistan's fragile economic recovery and to bolster constitutional democracy. Yet, beneath these high-minded overtures lies a deeply fractured political landscape where mutual distrust runs deep, and meaningful progress remains agonizingly out of reach.

The government's public push for reconciliation has been echoed by key coalition representatives. Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Tariq Fazal Chaudhry emphasized in the Senate that "the solution lies in seriousness," framing structured dialogue as the sole viable path forward. This was accompanied by direct political contact when Adviser to the Prime Minister on Political Affairs Rana Sanaullah, Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tararand other PML-N stalwarts met with opposition leaders from both houses of parliament. According to a press statement issued by the opposition Tehreek Tahafuz-e-Aayin-e-Pakistan (TTAP) alliance, discussions touched upon pivotal state matters, including the constitutional appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and broader political arrangements. However, despite these symbolic contact points and parliamentary facilitation efforts led by National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq, the overall political atmosphere remains clouded in skepticism, leaving observers to question whether these efforts represent genuine peace overtures or merely strategic posturing.

A closer examination of earlier engagement attempts reveals why little optimism is attached to the latest rounds of talks. The primary obstacle to productive dialogue is the severe structural conflict between the government's conditions and the opposition's core grievances. The ruling coalition maintains a strict posture of conditional negotiation, asserting that talks must strictly adhere to lawful and constitutional matters and will not proceed under the threat of protests, long marches, or public confrontation.

Conversely, the opposition—spearheaded by PTI—points to a persistent state crackdown on party workers, ongoing legal cases, and the continued imprisonment of its founder, Imran Khan. For the opposition, formal dialogue cannot meaningfully proceed while state machinery actively targets its organizational infrastructure and delays the implementation of judicial orders.

This impasse has been further exacerbated by administrative mishandling and legal controversy. The government's recent handling of a Supreme Court order regarding a comprehensive medical examination for Imran Khan has deepened tensions. Rather than generating goodwill, administrative missteps surrounding the court order have deepened bitterness within PTI ranks, effectively discrediting

moderate elements and emboldening hardliners who argue that mass mobilization and street pressure are the only language the state understands. Consequently, formal negotiations remain deadlocked, caught between the government's refusal to yield under pressure and the opposition's refusal to negotiate from a position of perceived vulnerability.

Complicating the landscape further is the evident lack of cohesion within both the ruling coalition and individual political parties. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), the government's most critical coalition partner, has increasingly charted an independent course. Seeking to leverage its political weight, the PPP has begun courting opposition factions to support its own legislative agenda, including efforts to block specific government initiatives. Simultaneously, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), another formidable political force, has signalled its intention to align with the opposition TTAP alliance to challenge the ruling administration. These fluid realignments indicate that the legislative floor is becoming increasingly unpredictable, frustrating unified government strategy.

Even within the leading ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), a visible generational and tactical disconnect has emerged. While senior leaders in Islamabad advocate for parliamentary facilitation through inter-party committees and in-camera sessions, regional leadership has adopted a far more aggressive tone. The Punjab chief minister's recent public salvos against both the PPP and PTI—accusing the former of systemic corruption and the latter of fomenting anarchy—highlight a pronounced divergence in messaging. This political dissonance undermines the credibility of the prime minister's reconciliation offers, leaving opposition leaders to question whether the federal government possesses the internal consensus required to deliver on negotiated commitments.

Despite these daunting roadblocks, the imperative for a Grand National Reconciliation has never been more urgent. Pakistan stands at a critical juncture where political instability directly threatens democratic continuity and economic survival. Political analysts and moderate stakeholders emphasize that transitioning from symbolic overtures to genuine negotiations requires immediate Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). Lowering the political temperature necessitates preliminary steps: easing state restrictions on political activities, halting targeted arrests, and demonstrating strict adherence to judicial pronouncements. Without these baseline gestures, no framework for dialogue can survive the prevailing climate of mutual suspicion.

Moreover, economic imperatives demand an immediate political ceasefire. Both sides face mounting public and international pressure to establish a working consensus—a binding "Charter of Economy"—to safeguard financial stabilization efforts, protect structural reforms, and navigate complex international debt obligations. Economic recovery cannot occur in the midst of continuous political warfare; market confidence requires institutional predictability that only political stability can provide.

To institutionalize this process, political leaders must establish a permanent, structured bipartisan parliamentary committee. Insulated from day-to-day media rhetoric and partisan warfare, such a mechanism would allow empowered representatives to negotiate binding agreements on electoral reforms, judicial independence, and constitutional boundaries. The time has come for the political class to recognize that democratic self-preservation demands mutual tolerance and a spirit of accommodation.

Pakistan's export economy dilemma

Muhammad Ali

Pakistan's external sector has entered the new fiscal year with an unwelcome warning sign. A trade deficit of almost $4 billion in the very first month of 2026-27 underlines the persistent weakness of the country's export base and raises fresh questions about the sustainability of an economic model that remains heavily dependent on external financing.

According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), the trade deficit widened by 25.17 percent year-on-year in July, reaching $3.948 billion. Imports surged 18 percent to $6.887 billion, while exports increased by a relatively encouraging 9.54 percent to $2.939 billion. The rise in exports is certainly positive and should not be ignored. However, the pace of export growth was nowhere near sufficient to offset the much sharper increase in imports. The immediate concern, therefore, is not that exports declined, but that the country continues to lack the capacity to generate export earnings at a rate capable of supporting a growing economy.

This imbalance is particularly troubling because Pakistan remains structurally dependent on foreign exchange generated from sources outside its productive export economy. Remittances from overseas Pakistanis have repeatedly provided a crucial cushion against external-sector pressures, while loans, deposits and other forms of external financing have helped bridge recurring financing gaps.

These sources of foreign exchange are extremely important and can provide valuable stability during periods of pressure. But they cannot permanently replace an export sector capable of generating sufficient dollars to finance imports, service external obligations and support sustainable economic expansion.

The latest trade figures once again expose the distance Pakistan has to travel before reaching that objective. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the country's export failure is that the substantial depreciation of the rupee over the past decade has not produced the transformation that conventional economic theory might have predicted. In principle, a weaker currency should make a country's goods cheaper in international markets and improve export competitiveness. Pakistan's experience has been considerably more complicated. Currency depreciation has increased the rupee cost of imported machinery, energy and intermediate goods, while persistent weaknesses in productivity and infrastructure have prevented exporters from fully exploiting any price advantage created by a weaker exchange rate.

The problem goes well beyond the exchange rate. Pakistani businesses continue to face high energy costs, logistical bottlenecks, limited access to modern technology, inconsistent taxation, regulatory uncertainty and a shortage of skilled labour in several sectors. These factors increase production costs and make it difficult for domestic producers to compete with exporters from countries that have built more efficient industrial ecosystems.

The fundamental weakness, however, is the absence of a coherent and sustained national export strategy. For decades, Pakistan has largely exported what its established industries happen to produce rather than systematically identifying changing patterns of global demand and then building domestic capacity around them. The country remains heavily reliant on a relatively narrow range of products, leaving export earnings vulnerable to changes in international prices, demand conditions and competitiveness.

A successful export strategy requires much more than announcing annual targets or offering temporary incentives. Governments need to identify industries and products with genuine growth potential, understand international supply chains, invest in skills and technology, improve trade infrastructure and create the conditions necessary for businesses to compete globally.

Comparative advantage is not necessarily a fixed characteristic that countries simply inherit. It can be developed. Economies that have successfully transformed their export sectors have invested heavily in education, technical skills, infrastructure, research, technology and market intelligence. They have also maintained policies long enough for businesses to make investment decisions with confidence. Pakistan has demonstrated the potential to do this, but it has rarely maintained the required consistency.

The export-oriented initiatives undertaken during the Musharraf era, for example, showed that sustained attention to market access, trade facilitation and commercial diplomacy could produce results. Yet successive governments failed to convert those efforts into a durable institutional framework capable of continuously identifying new opportunities and moving exporters into higher-value products and markets.

Instead, export policy has too often revolved around changing incentive packages, subsidies, tax concessions and short-term targets. These measures may provide temporary support to exporters, but they cannot substitute for improvements in productivity and competitiveness.

The consequences are now visible in the country's recurring balance-of-payments crises. Whenever external financing pressures intensify, Pakistan is forced to seek assistance from international institutions, friendly countries and global financial markets. The cycle provides temporary relief but leaves the underlying structural weakness largely intact.

The government's continued search for external financial support illustrates the problem. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb recently used his visit to Washington to seek a proposed $10 billion US exchange-stabilisation facility, alongside broader financing and investment support. Such arrangements can be valuable, particularly when a country is confronting external shocks or heightened geopolitical uncertainty. There is little economic logic in rejecting financing that can help stabilise reserves and prevent a balance-of-payments crisis.

But every external financing arrangement should also serve as a reminder that borrowing can only buy time. It cannot provide a permanent solution to a structural shortage of foreign exchange.

Pakistan must ultimately increase its capacity to earn dollars rather than repeatedly relying on arrangements that provide them temporarily. The July trade figures should therefore be treated as an early warning rather than dismissed as an isolated monthly fluctuation. A growing economy will naturally require more imports, particularly of machinery, energy and intermediate goods. Attempting to suppress imports indiscriminately in order to reduce the trade deficit would be counterproductive and could undermine investment and future growth.

The real objective should be to ensure that export growth consistently outpaces the growth in import requirements over the medium and long term. That requires a fundamental rethink of Pakistan's export policy. The country needs to identify high-potential sectors, diversify its product and market base, improve productivity, reduce energy and logistics costs, develop skilled manpower and integrate domestic producers into international supply chains. Equally important, export policy must survive changes in governments and political priorities.

Institutional accountability will also be essential. Export strategies should be accompanied by measurable targets, transparent performance indicators and regular assessments of whether public incentives are actually generating additional exports and investment.

Pakistan has become increasingly adept at securing the dollars needed to survive its next external financing crisis. Remittances, multilateral loans, bilateral support and other financing arrangements have repeatedly helped the country avoid more severe disruptions.

But survival cannot be the measure of economic success. The real challenge is to build an economy that generates enough foreign exchange through exports and other productive activities to finance its own growth. The July trade deficit is another reminder that Pakistan has yet to achieve that transformation.

The country does not simply need more dollars. It needs a productive economy capable of earning them. Liquidity can postpone a crisis, but only export competitiveness can provide a durable escape from the recurring cycle of external financing pressures.

Why Pakistan's power debt keeps compounding

Husnain Shahid

Pakistan's circular debt problem continues to defy repeated government efforts to contain it, with the stock of power-sector debt rising by Rs61 billion during 2025-26 and reaching Rs1.675 trillion by the end of June 2026. The latest increase has once again highlighted the deep-rooted inefficiencies in the electricity supply chain and raised concerns over the government's ability to meet commitments made under the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Extended Fund Facility programme.

The end-June stock stood above the Rs1.614 trillion target agreed with the IMF, underscoring the gap between the government's plans for stabilising the power sector and the realities on the ground. Despite repeated interventions, circular debt continues to accumulate, largely because payments owed within the power chain remain unsettled and several distribution companies continue to struggle with poor recoveries, high losses and operational weaknesses.

Officials said that the situation in June was particularly difficult for two major reasons. K-Electric had outstanding payments of around Rs200 billion against power purchases, while weaknesses in several distribution companies accounted for another estimated Rs100 billion. These developments have raised a fundamental question: how can the government achieve zero circular debt flow when substantial amounts due to power-sector entities remain unpaid?

The latest figures also expose the limitations of relying on short-term financial adjustments to deal with what is essentially a structural problem. Unless the underlying causes of debt accumulation are addressed, efforts to retire existing liabilities risk being followed by another buildup of arrears.

The Power Division, while briefing the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), acknowledged that the earlier circular debt target agreed with the IMF had appeared realistic when it was formulated. At that time, international hydrocarbon prices were lower, recoveries by distribution companies had improved, technical losses were declining and interest rates were on a downward trajectory. These factors were expected to generate significant savings in subsidies and other power-sector costs. Based on those assumptions, the government had projected that circular debt would decline by around Rs779 billion, bringing the stock down to Rs1.614 trillion by the end of the last fiscal year.

The actual situation, however, turned out to be considerably more challenging. By May 31, 2026, circular debt had climbed to around Rs1.924 trillion. This figure included approximately Rs873 billion payable to banks under an approved circular debt financing arrangement. Under the financing plan, around Rs1.23 trillion was commercially secured on the recommendation of a task force established to retire accumulated power-sector debt. The cost of interest associated with this borrowing was to be passed on to consumers. The IMF eventually agreed to the arrangement, partly because the cost of financing had become more manageable following the sharp reduction in the central bank's policy rate from 22 percent to 11.5 percent.

While the lower interest rate has eased the financial burden associated with the debt-financing arrangement, it does not resolve the fundamental problem of why circular debt continues to accumulate in the first place. Borrowing to clear old liabilities can provide temporary relief, but it cannot serve as a substitute for reforms that prevent new arrears from emerging. Another major complication concerns K-Electric's tariff-related matters, which remain sub judice. The Power Division has said it would proactively pursue the case, recognising the importance of resolving outstanding issues involving the utility. At the same time, it proposed the use of a Technical Supplementary Grant (TSG) of approximately Rs152 billion. The proposal involved transferring funds from Demand No. 45 of the Finance Division to Demand No. 33 of the Power Division to finance specific energy and power-sector initiatives, including solarisation projects and subsidy adjustments.

The proposed financial support was considered necessary to ensure that obligations under the Circular Debt Management Plan were met and to avoid any delay or suspension in the release of the next IMF tranche.

On June 16, 2026, the ECC considered the Power Division's request for the release of Rs152 billion as a TSG for power distribution companies. However, rather than releasing the entire amount, the committee approved a partial release of Rs54.451 billion, with the remaining Rs97.549 billion adjusted accordingly. The latest intervention is not without precedent. Governments have repeatedly relied on additional budgetary allocations, subsidy adjustments, debt restructuring and commercial borrowing to address the circular debt problem. Yet the accumulation of fresh liabilities has continued.

This recurring pattern has left analysts with little confidence that the latest measures will provide a permanent solution. The government may succeed in containing the flow of circular debt for a particular period and subsequently retire a portion of the accumulated stock, but without fundamental changes to the electricity market, the same problem is likely to reappear. The power sector therefore needs to be examined as a whole rather than through isolated financial interventions. One of the most important reforms would involve reconsidering the existing tariff differential subsidy regime. At present, taxpayers bear a substantial annual burden to bridge the difference between the cost of electricity and the tariffs charged to consumers across distribution companies. The cost of this subsidy is estimated at nearly Rs750 billion a year.

A more sustainable approach would be to allow each distribution company to determine tariffs based on its actual cost structure, while simultaneously holding management accountable for improving efficiency, reducing losses and increasing recoveries. Such a system would expose the financial weaknesses of individual companies instead of allowing inefficiencies to be repeatedly absorbed by the federal budget.

However, tariff reform alone will not be sufficient. The government must also revisit the agreements signed with Independent Power Producers (IPPs), particularly arrangements involving dollar-denominated capacity payments and pay-or-take obligations. These contracts have contributed substantially to the fixed costs of electricity generation and have limited the government's flexibility in reducing tariffs. The challenge is to find a balance between protecting contractual obligations and ensuring that the power sector remains financially viable for consumers and the state. Any restructuring must be legally sound and negotiated transparently, but avoiding the issue altogether will only prolong the financial strain.

Pakistan's circular debt crisis is ultimately a symptom of broader weaknesses in the power sector. Poor recoveries, technical and commercial losses, inefficient distribution companies, expensive generation, subsidy distortions and rigid contractual arrangements have combined to create a system in which financial liabilities repeatedly accumulate.

The latest rise to Rs1.675 trillion should therefore be treated as a warning rather than merely another fiscal statistic. Meeting IMF targets through temporary financial measures may provide short-term breathing space, but lasting stability will require structural reform.

Unless the government tackles the causes of circular debt instead of repeatedly financing its consequences, the cycle of accumulation, borrowing, subsidy and debt retirement will continue. A financially sustainable power sector is essential not only for meeting IMF commitments but also for reducing the burden on taxpayers, lowering electricity costs, restoring investor confidence and putting Pakistan's economy on a more stable growth path.

Is Pakistan's economic turnaround real?

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's latest fiscal figures provide a rare measure of encouragement for an economy that has spent years struggling with persistent deficits, rising public debt and weak revenue mobilisation. According to the Finance Ministry's fiscal operations report for 2025-26, the country's fiscal deficit declined to 2.6 percent of GDP, equivalent to around Rs3.3 trillion, marking its lowest level in 22 years.

The improvement is significant. It suggests that the government's efforts to bring public finances under control are beginning to produce measurable results and that some of the immediate pressures on the economy have eased. The government also recorded a primary surplus of Rs3.634 trillion, or 2.9 percent of GDP, an important indicator because it shows that revenues exceeded non-interest expenditures by a substantial margin.

Several factors contributed to the improved fiscal position. Provincial governments collectively generated a surplus of Rs1.449 trillion, while the federal government benefited from savings of Rs1.967 trillion in domestic debt-servicing costs. Higher collections from the petroleum levy also helped strengthen government finances. These figures deserve recognition, particularly after years in which Pakistan struggled with large fiscal gaps and rapidly expanding public debt. Yet the numbers should not be interpreted as evidence that the country's underlying fiscal problems have been permanently resolved. The latest improvement is encouraging, but much of it reflects circumstances and expenditure adjustments that may not be sustainable without deeper structural reforms.

The most important question is therefore not whether Pakistan managed to reduce its deficit in 2025-26, but whether it can maintain that improvement in the years ahead. A fiscal deficit of 2.6 percent of GDP is undoubtedly a major improvement compared with the much higher deficits recorded in previous years. However, the figure remains significant when viewed against the size of Pakistan's accumulated public debt and the narrowness of its tax base. The country continues to devote a substantial portion of its revenues to debt servicing, leaving limited resources for infrastructure, education, healthcare and other development priorities.

Moreover, the composition of the fiscal improvement warrants closer scrutiny. A considerable part of the reduction came from provincial surpluses, lower domestic debt-servicing costs and restraint in development expenditure. These measures can help achieve short-term fiscal targets, but they do not necessarily address the fundamental weakness of the revenue system.

The Federal Board of Revenue remains at the centre of this problem. Its inability to consistently achieve ambitious revenue targets, including those agreed with the International Monetary Fund, highlights the limitations of the existing tax collection system. Pakistan continues to have a relatively narrow documented tax base, significant tax exemptions and substantial economic activity that remains outside the formal tax net. Without a durable expansion of tax revenues, fiscal consolidation will remain vulnerable. Governments can cut expenditure for a period, delay development projects or benefit from lower interest costs, but these measures cannot substitute for a stronger and broader revenue base.

Public debt remains another major constraint. Although the pace of debt accumulation has reportedly moderated, the overall stock remains exceptionally large and continues to impose a heavy burden on the economy. Debt servicing absorbs resources that could otherwise be used for productive investment and public services. It also limits the government's ability to respond effectively when the economy faces external shocks, natural disasters or sudden increases in energy and commodity prices.

The government's continued need to borrow also has wider economic consequences.

Heavy public-sector borrowing can compete with the private sector for available credit, making it more difficult for businesses to finance expansion and investment. When combined with elevated interest rates, this can suppress economic activity, discourage new investment and weaken business confidence.

The relationship between fiscal and monetary policy is particularly important in this context. Pakistan's central bank has maintained the policy rate at 11.5 percent, reflecting the continuing need to remain cautious about inflation and macroeconomic stability. If fiscal pressures remain high, monetary authorities have less room to reduce interest rates without risking renewed inflationary or external pressures.

A credible and sustained fiscal consolidation programme could therefore provide the monetary authorities with greater space to ease financial conditions. Lower interest rates, in turn, could reduce the cost of borrowing for businesses and households, encourage investment and support economic growth.

Pakistan's recent sovereign credit-rating upgrade to 'B' by S&P Global Ratings is another indication that international institutions are beginning to recognise improvements in macroeconomic management and the country's external position. The upgrade is important because a stronger sovereign rating can eventually reduce borrowing costs and improve investor confidence.

Nevertheless, a 'B' rating remains firmly in the sub-investment-grade category. Pakistan therefore remains a relatively high-risk destination for international capital. Many institutional investors are restricted from investing in assets below investment grade, while others require higher returns to compensate for the perceived risks.

The challenge is consequently to turn a single year of improved fiscal performance into a sustained trend. S&P has indicated that further rating improvements would depend on Pakistan maintaining its fiscal deficit below three percent of GDP, reducing government debt to below 60 percent of GDP and bringing external debt below 100 percent of current account receipts. These benchmarks underline an important point: international investors and rating agencies are looking for consistency rather than temporary improvements.

Pakistan's priority should therefore be to institutionalise fiscal discipline. The country needs a broader tax base, stronger compliance, fewer exemptions and a revenue system capable of generating higher collections without placing an excessive burden on existing taxpayers. At the same time, government spending must become more efficient, with greater emphasis on productive investment and less tolerance for wasteful expenditure.

The government has demonstrated that fiscal stabilisation is achievable. The decline in the deficit and emergence of a sizable primary surplus are important achievements that should not be dismissed. But they should be regarded as a foundation for reform rather than an endpoint.

The real test will come in the years ahead. If Pakistan can sustain deficits below three percent of GDP, steadily reduce its debt burden, strengthen revenue mobilisation and create room for lower interest rates, the current improvement could mark the beginning of a genuine economic turnaround. If, however, fiscal gains depend primarily on temporary savings, provincial surpluses and curtailed development spending, the underlying weaknesses could quickly re-emerge.

Pakistan cannot afford another cycle in which short-term fiscal relief creates the illusion of lasting stability. The country needs to convert this moment of relative stability into lasting structural reform. Only then can fiscal consolidation translate into lower borrowing costs, greater private investment, stronger economic growth and a more resilient economy.

Taliban's failed governance in Afghanistan

Raza Khan

As the Afghan Taliban regime recently completed five years in power, Afghanistan remains far from stable despite this relatively long period, while chaos, uncertainty and frustration have grown significantly among Afghans. Nevertheless, there are certain quarters within Afghanistan that claim that had the Afghan Taliban not been in power, the situation would have been far worse. However, at the moment, the situation remains extremely difficult in Afghanistan, with panic, uncertainty and a deep sense of insecurity prevailing across the country.

It may be recalled that the Afghan Taliban forced their way back into power on August 15, 2021, as the militia's troops entered the capital Kabul and the regime of elected President Ashraf Ghani collapsed. The Afghan national army, comprising more than 300,000 soldiers, also collapsed like a house of cards within no time. This paved the way for Afghan Taliban forces to establish their second regime after their ouster by the United States-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in November 2001, within a couple of months of the 9/11 attacks on the US mainland by Al Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden and hosted by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Importantly, although the Taliban forced their way back into power in 2021, this was only possible after the militia signed a peace agreement with Washington in Doha in February 2020. Under the agreement, the US agreed to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2021, after almost 20 years of military intervention and presence in the country. Under the Doha peace accord, the Afghan Taliban had agreed that they would establish a broad-based interim government in Afghanistan that would provide a roadmap for the future governmental dispensation in the country.

However, the Afghan Taliban clearly reneged on their promise of forming an interim, broad-based government representing all regions and ethnic groups of Afghanistan. Instead, the Afghan Taliban, which calls itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (EIA), declared itself the "interim" regime, claiming that it has representation from all parts of Afghanistan. This is clearly a misstatement on the part of the militia.

The Afghan Taliban, since their emergence in Afghanistan in 1994 after their leaders and fighters studied at madrassas in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, have, to all intents and purposes, remained a predominantly Pakhtun group. There may have been a minuscule presence of Tajik and Uzbek militants and a few commanders within the fold of the Afghan Taliban, but the group, in essence, has remained an ethnically Pakhtun movement. This has also been one of the fundamental reasons that the Afghan Taliban regime has been providing extensive support to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, which almost entirely comprises Pakhtun fighters and which Islamabad has designated as Fitna-tul-Khawarij (discord or strife caused by seceders or rebels).

In fact, it was the TTP that provided critical support to the Afghan Taliban during their insurgency against the elected Afghan governments of President Hamid Karzai and President Ashraf Ghani, which were indubitably supported by the US-NATO military presence in Afghanistan. The TTP did so mainly because of its belief that the Afghan Taliban were their co-ethnic brothers. Significantly, Pakistan also last year openly declared that it considered both the Afghan Taliban and the TTP to be part of the same militant phenomenon. There is considerable substance in this argument because the TTP has always considered the founder of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar, and his successors as its spiritual and operational guides.

Thus, the Afghan Taliban could not fulfil the promise they made to the international community and, above all, to the Afghan people that there would be a broad-based, representative interim regime that would pave the way for another such government, but only after determining the process and procedure, obviously with at least some democratic elements, to put Afghanistan on the track of stability, reconstruction and development.

Although the Afghan Taliban have been doing their utmost to stabilize and develop Afghanistan, many of their efforts have failed to produce the desired results. The regime may have carried out some civil works and created a somewhat business-friendly environment in Kabul, but these measures have not been enough to address the multiple economic, political and social woes confronting most Afghans.

For instance, according to estimates by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), nearly three out of four Afghans, or around 74 percent of the population, struggle to meet their basic living needs. In other words, around 28 million people face severe economic hardship and subsistence insecurity. Keeping these statistics in view, all claims made by the Taliban regime and its apologists in Pakistan or elsewhere appear to be naïve and disconnected from the realities facing ordinary Afghans. One would therefore like to offer them sincere advice that they should not be carried away by religious sentiments alone and must keep the ground realities in perspective while supporting the regime in Kabul.

Another very important promise made by the Afghan Taliban in the Doha Accord of 2020 was that they would not allow Afghan soil to be used against any other country. This effectively amounted to an admission of the mistake committed by their founder, Mullah Omar, by providing support and sanctuary to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, whose organization carried out the September 11 attacks in the United States.

Significantly, the Taliban had also assured Afghanistan's neighbours that they would not permit terrorist groups to operate from Afghan territory. However, the consistent, extensive and seemingly unending support of the Kabul regime to the TTP, which has carried out massive attacks inside Pakistan over the last four years, suggests that these Taliban promises have not been honoured.

Apart from Pakistan, the presence of groups such as Al Qaeda, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Jamaat Ansarullah of Tajikistan poses significant security concerns for Afghanistan's neighbouring countries and points towards the Afghan Taliban's inability, and in some cases apparent unwillingness, to rein in these groups.

Against the backdrop of the above situation, the strengthening of resistance to the Afghan Taliban from three major groups, including the National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud; the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), led by General Yasin Zia, a former Afghan Army Chief of Staff, deputy defence minister and intelligence official; and the United Front of Afghanistan (UFA), led by former General Sami Sadat and commander of Afghan Special Forces, should not come as a surprise.

In the coming days and months, the Afghan Taliban are likely to face growing resistance from these groups. It is important to note that together these groups claim to have carried out at least 15 attacks on Taliban positions across nine Afghan provinces in just one week at the end of July and the beginning of August, claiming that around 30 Taliban members were killed.

The attacks were reported in Badakhshan, Kunduz, Baghlan, Kabul, Faryab, Ghor, Herat, Kandahar and Helmand. Noticeably, the Afghanistan Freedom Front, the United Front of Afghanistan and the National Resistance Front each claimed responsibility for attacks in different parts of the country in which several Taliban members were allegedly killed.

So far, these groups have not come together on a common platform. However, if they were to join hands and coordinate their activities, this could mark the beginning of another major phase of armed conflict in Afghanistan. Such a development could potentially have serious consequences not only for Afghanistan but also for the entire South Asian region, particularly Pakistan and other neighbouring states. The possibility of renewed instability, refugee flows, militant activity and cross-border insecurity makes the evolving resistance to the Taliban a development that cannot be ignored.

Pakistan’s maternal mortality crisis demands urgent action

Dr Fatima Khan

Pakistan remains among the countries carrying a disproportionately heavy share of the global maternal mortality burden, with a recent United Nations report highlighting the scale of the challenge and the urgent need for stronger healthcare systems, greater investment and wider social reforms.

In 2023, Pakistan, Nigeria, India and the Democratic Republic of the Congo together accounted for nearly half of the estimated 260,000 maternal deaths recorded worldwide. Nigeria alone reported around 75,000 deaths, representing 28.7 percent of the global total, while India and the DRC each recorded about 19,000 deaths. Pakistan accounted for approximately 11,000 maternal deaths, or 4.1 percent of the worldwide figure.

The statistics are deeply troubling because most maternal deaths are preventable. They are not simply an unavoidable consequence of pregnancy or childbirth. With timely access to quality antenatal care, skilled birth attendants, emergency obstetric services and appropriate postnatal treatment, many women who currently die could survive.

The report, prepared jointly by UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNFPA, also offers a mixed picture globally. Maternal mortality has fallen significantly since 2000, with an overall decline of around 40 percent. Improvements in access to healthcare and maternal services have contributed to this progress. Yet the gains have been highly uneven, and recent disruptions to health services and international aid have raised fears that progress could slow or even be reversed.

The threat is particularly serious in low-income and crisis-affected countries where health systems are already under enormous pressure. Reductions in international development assistance can force governments and aid organisations to scale back programmes that provide essential maternal and child health services. For women living in remote or impoverished communities, the disappearance of such services can mean the difference between a safe delivery and a preventable death.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how quickly maternal health can deteriorate when essential services are disrupted. Maternal deaths increased sharply during the pandemic as healthcare systems were overwhelmed and women faced difficulties accessing antenatal care, skilled delivery services and emergency treatment. The disruption showed that maternity services cannot be treated as optional during national or international emergencies.

Improving maternity care must consequently go hand in hand with broader investments in women’s health and reproductive rights. Women need access to family planning, accurate health information and quality healthcare before, during and after pregnancy. Without these services, women can be exposed to repeated and closely spaced pregnancies that increase risks to both mothers and children.

The consequences of maternal deaths extend beyond the women who lose their lives. When a mother dies during pregnancy or childbirth, her newborn is also placed at much greater risk. Children who lose their mothers face greater vulnerability to malnutrition, poor health, interrupted education and poverty. Families can lose their primary caregiver, while communities suffer the loss of productive members.

This makes maternal health both a healthcare issue and a development issue. UNICEF has stressed the importance of investing in midwives, nurses and community health workers, particularly in vulnerable communities. These frontline workers often serve as the first and sometimes only point of contact between women and the formal healthcare system. Ensuring that they have adequate training, supplies and institutional support can significantly improve maternal and newborn outcomes.

The global figures also reveal a stark

geographical imbalance. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for around 70 percent of maternal deaths in 2023, despite recording important progress over the longer term. Poverty, weak healthcare systems, limited access to skilled medical professionals and armed conflict continue to make pregnancy especially dangerous in many parts of the region.

Nearly two-thirds of maternal deaths now occur in fragile or conflict-affected settings. In such environments, hospitals may be damaged or inaccessible, medical supplies may be scarce and trained healthcare workers may flee violence. Women may also face displacement, food insecurity and restricted access to reproductive healthcare.

Pakistan has its own complex set of challenges. Poverty, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, especially in rural areas, limited access to family planning and low levels of awareness all contribute to maternal and infant mortality. For many women, reaching a facility capable of providing emergency obstetric care can itself be a major challenge.

The problem is compounded by early and underage marriage. In Sindh, the Child Marriages Restraint Act of 2013 was intended to prevent child marriage, but weak enforcement remains a serious concern. Girls married at a young age are more likely to become pregnant before their bodies are fully prepared for childbirth and may subsequently experience repeated pregnancies.

Early marriage also frequently interrupts education. Once girls leave school, they are less likely to receive accurate information about reproductive health, family planning and their legal rights. Their ability to make informed decisions about pregnancy and healthcare can consequently be severely restricted.

Keeping girls in school is therefore one of the most effective long-term investments Pakistan can make in maternal health. Education improves health awareness, expands economic opportunities and increases women's ability to make informed decisions about marriage and childbearing. Educated women are also generally better positioned to seek medical assistance when complications arise.

Family planning must form another central component of the national response. Women should be able to determine when and how many children they wish to have and should have access to safe and affordable reproductive healthcare. Preventing unintended and closely spaced pregnancies can reduce health risks for mothers and newborns alike.

Maternal health policies must also address conditions such as anaemia, malaria and chronic diseases that can complicate pregnancy. Improving nutrition and strengthening primary healthcare would help identify risks earlier and enable women to receive treatment before relatively manageable conditions become life-threatening.

Better data are equally important. Governments need reliable, detailed information to identify communities and groups facing the highest risks. Without accurate district-level data, resources may not reach the women who need them most. Stronger monitoring systems can also help authorities measure whether programmes are delivering meaningful improvements.

The international community has an important role to play, particularly at a time when reductions in development assistance threaten programmes in vulnerable countries. However, Pakistan cannot rely indefinitely on external funding. Sustainable progress requires domestic political commitment, adequate public financing and health systems capable of delivering essential services consistently.

Maternal mortality should therefore be viewed as a measure of the strength and fairness of the wider healthcare system. A country that cannot ensure safe pregnancy and childbirth for its poorest women cannot claim to have achieved meaningful health equity.

The way forward is clear, even if implementation is difficult. Pakistan needs stronger primary healthcare, better-equipped maternity facilities, more trained midwives and nurses, wider access to family planning, improved maternal nutrition and effective enforcement of laws against underage marriage. It must also keep girls in school and give them the knowledge and opportunities needed to make informed choices about their lives.

Preventing maternal deaths is not merely about saving lives at the moment of childbirth. It is about protecting families, improving child welfare, strengthening human capital and creating healthier communities.

The UN findings should therefore serve as a call to action rather than another alarming statistic. Medical solutions exist, but they will work only when women can actually reach them. Pakistan must invest not only in hospitals and healthcare workers but also in girls' education, reproductive rights, social protection and economic opportunity.

Saving mothers means protecting the next generation. Investing in maternal and newborn health is not simply a humanitarian obligation; it is an investment in Pakistan's human potential and in the country's long-term social and economic future.

Israel, Turkiye and the post- Abrahamic Middle East

Galip Dalay

Recently, Israeli fighter jets attacked Abu al-Duhur airbase in northwestern Syria, drawing condemnations from the United States, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, as well as regional countries. The Israeli government claimed that it had intelligence of Turkish military movement to the site.

In a subsequent interview, US Ambassador to Turkiye and Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack said the US had received this intelligence from the Israelis six days before the attack. However, US intelligence conducted its own due diligence and found no basis for the claim. The incident not only reflects a shift in the dynamics between Turkiye and Israel, but also signals a regional reordering that the latter is no longer at the centre of. Seeing the Israeli attack on the Syrian base as a provocation, Ankara refrained from escalating and instead provided an off-ramp out of the crisis. It framed the issue not in bilateral terms but as one between Israel and the US, and between Israel and the regional and international consensus.

Normally, there is a deconfliction mechanism between Turkiye and Israel. However, as Barrack indicated in the interview, Israel did not warn Turkiye about the attack, which could have triggered a military response. The US envoy called for a deconfliction mechanism, but such an initiative can be effective only if the sides involved want it to be. In this case, there is no evidence that Israel sought de-escalation. In fact, it appears escalation was the intended outcome, as Israel notified neither Turkiye nor the US about the attack and acted on a pretext that the US intelligence found no basis for – a ploy to boost Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's electoral campaign.

After the US-imposed lull on the Iran front, Netanyahu is likely seeking escalation on other fronts, be it Syria, Lebanon or Gaza, in the run-up to the Israeli election. The challenge for Turkiye would be to avoid taking Netanyahu's bait while also preventing the normalisation of such aggression. That would require direct intervention by US President Donald Trump to rein in Netanyahu. Indeed, a trilateral deconfliction mechanism can work and be credible only if the US throws real weight behind it.

But even if a mechanism is in place, it would not change the fact that Syria has altered the lens through which Turkiye and Israel view each other. For a long time, the core of Turkiye's discontent with Israel was the Palestinian issue. Hence, it was more humanitarian-, identity- and solidarity-based in nature. Today, Ankara views Israeli attempts to undermine the Syrian transition as having direct repercussions for its national security. Therefore, Turkiye is no longer seeing Israel solely through the prism of the Palestinian question. Rather, it increasingly sees it as a national security challenge, with Israeli regional revisionism threatening its interests.

From the Eastern Mediterranean to the Horn of Africa and the wider Middle East, Turkiye and Israel have conflicting policies, priorities and threat perceptions. Despite this, Syria serves as a microcosm of Turkiye and Israel's visions of the regional order. Ankara wants its southern neighbour to be centralised, stable and capable militarily. In contrast, Israel wants a Syria that is weak, fragmented and bereft of serious military might. Yet this is not merely a conflict between Turkish and Israeli visions. Israel is at odds with the regional and international consensus on Syria. The US, the UK, Europe and regional states have all supported a centralised and stable government in Damascus. In an ironic way, the only other regional state that probably wants a weak or failed Syria is Iran.

Like any other sovereign state, Syria will have an army. If Israel believes that the only way to ensure its own security is by keeping its neighbouring or regional states weak, fragmented and bereft of military capability, this is a recipe for perpetual wars and for regional and international isolation. The undermining of the Syrian state and the failure of its transition would pave the way for non-state actors and radicalism, which would bode ill for the entire region, including Israel. Indeed, neighbouring Lebanon should serve as a cautionary tale. The Israeli occupation and the weakness of the Lebanese state gave birth to and empowered Hezbollah.

Israel and Turkiye's ideas of regional order are also at odds. The recent Mecca Pact, which brought together Turkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, is not inherently anti-Israel. However, it represents a regional shift that signals the failure of the order envisioned by the Abraham Accords, or similar initiatives such as India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) or the strategic partnership between India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US known as I2U2.

The Abrahamic vision of the regional order was premised on Arab-Israeli normalisation and cooperation under the US security umbrella. Hard containment of Iran, soft containment of Turkiye, and de-emphasising the Palestinian issue were also part of the same vision. Inherently, this Abrahamic vision had more to do with Israel and its regional normalisation than the Arab states and their needs and priorities. However, with its aggressive and revisionist policies, Israel has deepened the prospect of its regional isolation, increased the cost of any normalisation, and doomed this Abrahamic – or Israeli-centric – vision of regional order.

Israeli revisionism is not only driving a wedge between Israel and other major regional states, but it is also revealing the gap between Israel and the US on the question of regional reordering. While Israel opposes the Mecca Pact, Trump has hailed it, likely seeing it as aligned with his strategy of burden-sharing and burden-shifting with regional allies, and as enjoying more regional legitimacy and acceptance. The US position might also reflect a recalibration of Washington's regional vision.

Over the last decade, the US invested heavily in creating a regional order premised on Israel and the Arab-Gulf states. But this was essentially an Israeli-centric project for the regional order. This vision is no longer tenable, and no one is more responsible for its demise than Israel itself.

Protect taxpayers and consumers before granting sugar export permits

Media reports suggest the Pakistan Sugar Mills Association (PSMA) has appealed to the government to allow export of 1.2 million tonnes of sugar. This deserves informed public scrutiny before the requested permission is granted. There is a legitimate economic argument in favour of exporting a genuine and independently verified surplus. In principle, exporting a genuine surplus is neither objectionable nor undesirable. The problem arises when the quantity declared as 'surplus' is based substantially on figures supplied by the very industry that stands to benefit from the requested export permit.

Pakistan has unfortunately witnessed the consequences of such decisions before. Previous investigations raised serious questions about the accuracy of production and stock data, export subsidies, market manipulation and the eventual impact of exports on domestic prices. The more disturbing aspect is the proposal to provide a large export subsidy.

Why should the taxpayer subsidise the export of a commodity which, once it is exported, may subsequently have to be imported at a substantially higher international price if domestic supplies become inadequate? Such a policy can effectively make the public pay twice — first through the subsidy, and then later through higher prices.

In the past, there have been allegations that export-related subsidies were claimed on the basis of questionable or inadequate documentation, including instances where parties other than genuine exporters allegedly benefitted. The role of banks and other institutions involved in verifying export contracts, shipping documents, export proceeds and subsidy claims must also be examined. No subsidy should be released merely against paper document-ation without independent verification.

Before permitting the full 1.2 million tonnes to be exported, the government should, therefore, have the country's actual sugar stocks, expected production, consumption requirements and strategic reserves independently verified through third-party data. Also, it must establish a minimum domestic reserve sufficient to protect consumers from any subsequent shortage or abnormal price increase. If at all, export must be allowed in phases rather than automatically allowing the entire 1.2 million tonnes at once, with each subsequent tranche dependent upon verified domestic availability and prices.

As for export subsidies, they need to be abolished altogether unless there is an overwhelming and demonstrable national economic justification. If a subsidy is nevertheless approved, it should be paid only after independent verification of the physical shipment and receipt of the full export proceeds through the banking system.

Further, the federal government needs to commission an independent audit of previous sugar export subsidies, including examination of the documentation submitted to banks, customs and other authorities, and identification of any subsidy paid to persons or entities that did not actually export sugar. Those who may have submitted or facilitated false claims need to be held accountable.

Pakistan cannot afford a policy in which private parties enjoy the profits of exports, while the taxpayer bears the cost of subsidies and the ordinary consumer ultimately bears the cost of any resulting shortage and price increase. The objective should not be to prevent sugar exports. It should be to ensure that only the genuine surplus gets exported without compromising the domestic food security needs and without transferring private commercial risk to the taxpayer.

Shahid M. Murtaza
Karachi

Rising crime rates expose Sindh's critical forensic deficit

This is with reference to the case involving the death of a Karachi-based young entrepreneur. The case has also raised concerns about the forensic infrastructure in the country. There has been an alarming surge in street crime, murder, armed robbery, kidnapping and other serious offences across Sindh, but, despite these persistent security challenges, the province still lacks a comprehensive, internationally accredited forensic science system that is capable of supporting modern criminal investigations.

In contemporary policing terms, forensic science is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity. DNA profiling, fingerprint analysis, ballistics, digital forensics and professional crime-scene investigation provide objective evidence that strengthens prosecutions, protects the innocent, and increases conviction rates. Without these scientific tools, law-enforcement agencies are often compelled to rely on conventional investigative methods that are less reliable and more vulnerable to human error.

The absence of a fully developed forensic infrastructure reflects a deeper problem of planning and governance. Public investment in policing must extend beyond manpower and equipment to include scientific capacity that can transform the criminal justice system. A province of Sindh's size and strategic importance deserves a state-of-the-art forensic network with regional laboratories, trained experts and seamless coordination among police, prosecution and judiciary.

The fight against crime cannot be won through reactive measures alone. It requires evidence-based policing backed by modern forensic capabilities. Strengthening forensic science should, therefore, become a governance priority, not merely a policy aspiration. Justice that is delivered through science is definitely more credible, more efficient and, ultimately, more effective.

Mubasher Mir
Karachi

Flawed criteria for Sindh college teachers

The recruitment criteria for teaching positions in Pakistan's public education sector reveal a puzzling inconsistency. At the university level, a PhD degree alone qualifies a candidate for appointment as an assistant professor. In contrast, the College Education Department requires not only a PhD, but also five years of teaching experience for similar positions. This disparity raises fundamental questions about fairness, merit and policy coherence.

This inconsistency has become even more evident in the ongoing recruitment process of the Sindh Public Service Commission (SPSC) under its recent advertisement. The commission has announced hundreds of vacancies for assistant professor (BPS-18) positions in the College Education Department across multiple disciplines. However, the pre-scribed criterion has effectively excluded fresh PhD graduates from these opportunities. The requirement of prior teaching experience creates a significant barrier for young scholars.

More importantly, the policy creates a practical dilemma: how are fresh PhD graduates expected to gain the 'required experience' if entry-level positions themselves demand prior experience? This circular requirement effectively blocks the path of fresh entrants and restricts the pool of qualified educators. While teaching experience is undoubtedly valuable, it should not be treated as an absolute pre- requisite at the initial stage of an academic career. Institutions can instead surely adopt more balanced approaches, such as probationary appointments, well-structured training programmes, and mentorship systems, to support the newly inducted faculty.

The inconsistency between university and college hiring criteria also undermines the principle of equal opportunity. Aligning the requirements across institutions — or at least providing a clear justification for the difference — would help ensure transparency and fairness. In a country striving to improve its higher education standards, policies that discourage qualified individuals from entering academia are counterproductive.

Revisiting these recruitment criteria is not merely an administrative necessity. In the right spirit, it will be a definite step towards strengthening the workforce and promoting merit-based opportunities.

Dr Raja Karim Bux
Islamabad

Long before logos, Arabian potters built a brand 3,200 years ago

Luis Arrais

People recognize a product before they read the label. The shape of a bottle or the pattern on a box may be all it takes. That kind of recognition usually gets filed under modern advertising.

A new study finds that the potters of one walled oasis in northwestern Arabia created a recognizable brand 3,200 years ago. Their vessels have been found more than 80 miles north of it.

Marta Luciani, an archaeologist at the University of Vienna, co-directs the dig at that oasis, Qurayyah, with Ahmed Abualhassan of Saudi Arabia's Heritage Commission. Her team put 40 pieces of painted pottery under a microscope and through trace-element testing, then compared the results with sherds found elsewhere in the region. The argument rests on clay recipes and chemical fingerprints, not on anything written down. Each site so far has produced matches one fragment at a time.

The pottery is easy to spot. It carries black and red geometric bands, plus stylized animals and human figures. Archaeologists find it across the southern Levant and in Arabia, and for decades they called it Midianite Pottery, after the biblical people of Midian. That name put the pots in the wrong place and the wrong century. Luciani's team, digging at Qurayyah since 2014, traced the invention to the oasis itself. The Midianites turn up in the Bible in Iron Age settings, by which time this pottery was already out of use. "It changes everything: first, with the Qurayyah Painted Ware (QPW) moniker we establish a clear connection with its production

FDA clears first robot that draws blood on its own

Ellyn Vohnoutka

The next time you roll up your sleeve for a blood test, the hand holding the needle may not be a hand at all.

Federal regulators have authorized the first robot capable of drawing blood from a patient's arm on its own, with no one guiding the needle. The device is called Aletta. It is cleared for use in adults at outpatient clinics — the walk-in sites where most routine blood work is done — the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced.

A phlebotomist, the trained professional who typically draws your blood, still has to start each session and stay nearby in case something goes wrong. But a single phlebotomist can oversee up to three of the machines at once. That is the point, regulators said. Clinics across the country are short on trained blood-draw staff, and patients are waiting longer as a result. "Blood draws are one of the most commonly performed medical procedures in the United States, yet patients may face delays due to a growing shortage of trained phlebotomists," said Dr. Michelle Tarver, who directs the FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health. She said the decision reflects the agency's push to move new technology to patients while keeping the safety standards they expect.

Here is how it works. The machine tells the patient how to position an arm. Then the patient or the supervisor presses a button. Aletta uses near-infrared light and ultrasound to locate a usable vein and to tell veins apart from arteries. If it cannot find a good one, it stops. If it does find a vein, the robot handles the rest: tourniquet, skin cleaning, needle insertion, tube changes, needle disposal and bandage. The supervising phlebotomist checks afterward that the tubes were filled in the correct order and to the correct volume. Several safeguards are built in.

Elephant skin inspires a new way to keep buildings cool

Andrei Ionescu

Elephants don't sweat, yet they somehow survive scorching African heat with nothing but wrinkled gray skin.

Now a team of researchers has copied that trick to build a tile that cools buildings without a single fan, compressor, or moving part. The work was led by Dorit Aviv, an associate professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School of Design. She worked alongside materials scientist Shu Yang from Penn Engineering and Kun-Hao Yu from Syracuse University.

Sweat is one of nature's most efficient cooling systems. As moisture evaporates from the skin, it carries heat away quietly and constantly. Elephants never developed that ability, yet they manage heat just fine. The secret lies in their skin. "Elephants have a network of cracks in their skin that trap water. When they spray themselves, that water stays put and evaporates slowly, cooling them over time," Aviv explained. The idea first came to Aviv through Yang, her longtime collaborator. It stuck partly because Aviv's research focuses on making buildings more thermodynamically efficient in a warming world. Buildings, of course, can't sweat either. The team's answer is a cement-based building tile engineered to capture water, hold it, and release it slowly through evaporation. The results were striking. Under infrared heating and periodic watering, the temperature beneath the tiles held steady at 89.6°F.

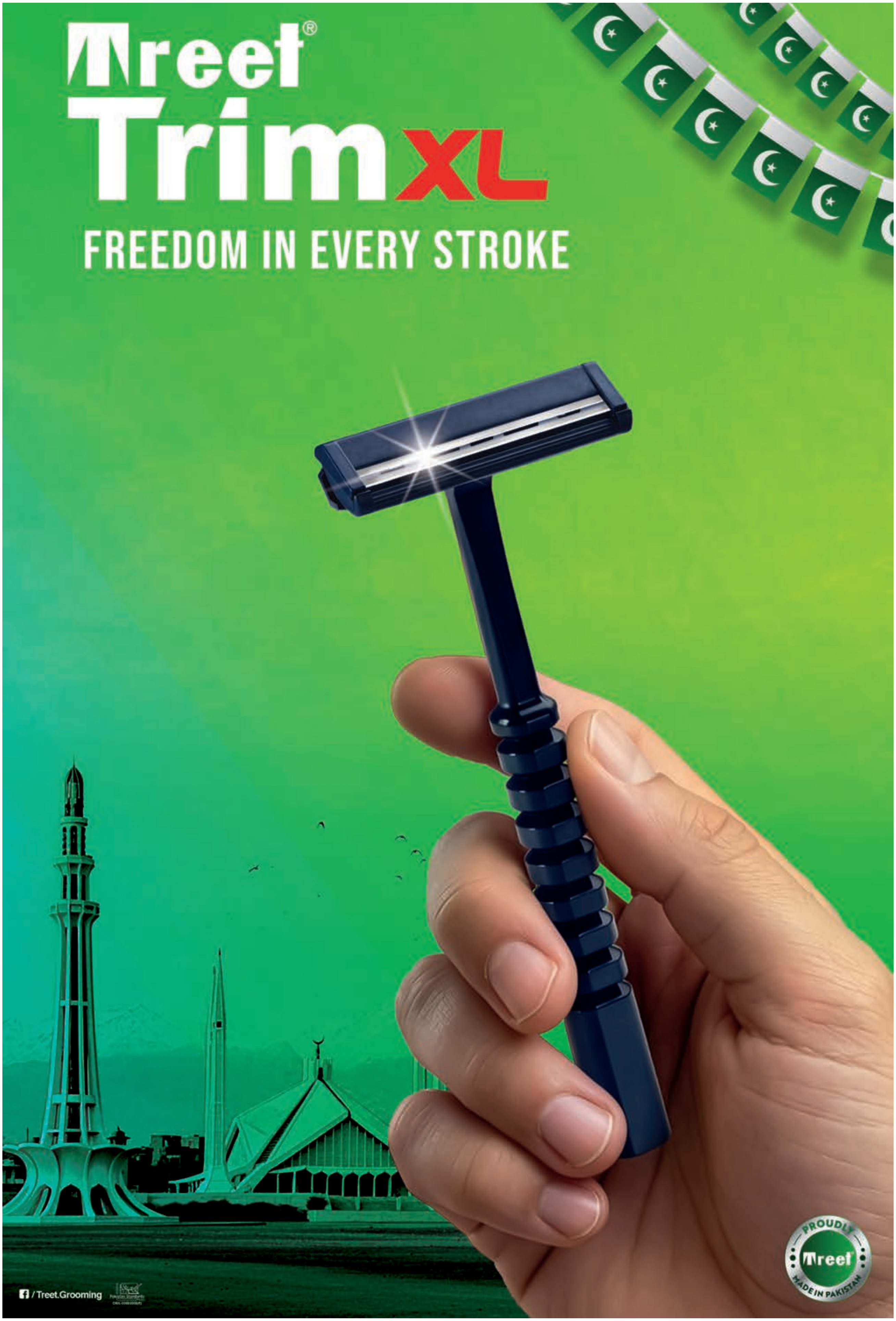
Nearly 8 In 10 young adults are in early stages of metabolic disorder

Dennis Thompson

A surprising number of young adults have early signs of a metabolic disorder that could have a lasting impact on their health, a new study says.

Nearly 8 of 10 people with an average age of 23 had signs of cardiovascular-kidney-metabolic syndrome, otherwise known as CKM syndrome, researchers reported in the journal Circulation: Population Health and Outcomes. CKM syndrome describes the interconnected relationship of obesity, diabetes, kidney disease and heart disease, researchers said in background notes. Early signs of CKM syndrome can include high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, insulin resistance, prediabetes, kidney disease or type 2 diabetes, according to the American Heart Association. For the new study, researchers analyzed data from nearly 1,300 young adults participating in a long-term study of family health. The research team evaluated each person's heart health by determining their CKM syndrome stage. The team also checked for signs of artery damage using ultrasound imaging.

Nearly 80% met criteria for CKM syndrome stages 1, 2 or 3, meaning they already had excess body fat, metabolic risk factors or early evidence of endangered heart health, researchers said. A small number of participants with more advanced CKM syndrome already had early signs of artery damage, increasing their risk of heart attack and stroke, researchers said. Nearly 3% had progressed to stage 3, with artery damage, researchers said. None had progressed to the most serious stage, CKM stage 4, in which people have developed full-blown heart disease or kidney failure.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